

Frequently Asked Questions

For Premed/Pre-Health Prospective Students

What does “pre-health” mean?

Pre-Health is an umbrella term for the diverse careers in the health professions that students may pursue, from acupuncture to veterinary medicine. Although most Princeton students pursue medicine, we encourage open-mindedness around the diverse career paths in the health fields and beyond.

What’s the “pre-health track”?

Since pre-med/health is not a major, students call it a “track” to signify the fact that there are certain courses you have to take in preparation for health professional school. This track is very flexible – hop on or off at any time, but you may want to check in with HPA if you decide to do so.

What services does Princeton University offer to its premed/pre-health students?

Whatever you’re looking for, we’re willing to help you find it! Aside from the myriad support structures and services offered to all students at Princeton, here are some specific to incoming pre-health students:

- **The Health Professions Advising Office (HPA)** – two full-time, professional advisers who guide students as they clarify their health professional goals, prepare for, and apply to health professional schools. Advisers are available through email, drop-in hours and individual appointments.
- **HPA Peer Advisers** – upper-class students affiliated with residential colleges who provide their perspectives on courses, majors, internships, application processes, etc.
- **20+ Health-Related Student Organizations** – these student-run groups provide support, resources and programming for pre-health students; they allow students to explore interests in the medicine and health.
- **First-Year and Sophomore Info Sessions** – geared specifically to students new to the “pre-health track,” these sessions give students a basic understanding of what it means to be pre-health.
- **The Doctor Is In Speaker Series** – a series featuring distinguished alumni physicians who participate in informal discussions with students. Alums share their experiences from all stages of their careers and from diverse perspectives in health fields.
- **Health Professions Resource Library** – a borrowing library of books, videos, handouts, and other materials.
- **HPA Website** – a wealth of information is available through our website, <http://hpa.princeton.edu>
- **HPA on Facebook** – we send reminders for events, and share links to interesting news stories, at www.facebook.com/princetonhpa
- **HPA Vitals** – a weekly newsletter featuring Questions of the Week, internship and research opportunities, health-related events on campus, and other information relevant to pre-health students.

ACADEMICS **What are the course requirements for admission to health professional programs?**

To meet the requirements for most medical and dental schools, we advise students to take one year each of lectures and labs in General Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Biology, and Physics; two semesters of English (Writing Seminar counts as one); and one semester each of calculus, statistics, and Biochemistry. Other programs’ requirements differ, especially for vet school; contact HPA early to explore these requirements.

Can I use AP credit to fulfill my pre-health requirements?

It depends on the schools and the courses. If you use AP credit to place out of an introductory science course, it is in your best interest to “replace” it with an upper level course with laboratory in that discipline. HPA advisers work closely with students to be sure that their course work plans will fulfill their pre-requisites for health professions schools.

Do I have to major in a science?

No. Beyond the required science courses, a broad liberal arts background is encouraged and expected, as is majoring in the field that most interests you.

Are there other classes related to medicine that I can take besides the requirements?

Yes! We post a list on our website every semester, and many of the courses fulfill general education requirements. Some favorites include *Race and Medicine* (AAS 403); *Medical Anthropology* (ANT 335); *Ancient Greco-Roman Medicine* (CLA 345); *Comparative Physiology* (EEB 314); *Critical Perspectives in Global Health* (GHP 350); *Infection: Biology, Burden, and Policy* (MOL 425); *Health Psychology* (PSY 317); and *Modern Genetics and Public Policy* (WWS 354).

What do most Princeton University pre-health students major in?

Quite a few major in Molecular Biology, Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, or Chemistry because that's where their intellectual passions lie, but applicants to health professional school each year come from diverse disciplines. Other popular concentrations are Psychology, Chemical & Biochemical Engineering, Anthropology, and the Woodrow Wilson School.

How will I get all the courses done?

Read through our "[Preparing for a Career in the Health Professions](#)" handout, available on our website and in hard copy at the HPA office. It provides more information about possible timelines by which you can complete courses, take your standardized test, and apply to health professions school.

If I don't do as well as I thought I would in classes does it mean I'm not meant to be a doctor?

The level of rigor and the expectations at Princeton will be far beyond what many students experienced in high school. It's normal to experience some "culture shock" as you make the adjustment. It is critical to "diagnose" any potential problems areas early and "treat" them via things like developing effective study strategies, visiting office hours, meeting with McGraw Center Learning Consultants, going to study groups, and adjusting time management. Talk with an adviser at HPA or in your residential college to assess what steps you might take as you adjust to Princeton. HPA advisers believe that everyone who got into Princeton has what it takes to become a physician – many students discover that there are other opportunities that better suit their talents and interests, but if you are sure that medicine is right for you, we will help you find a way to get there (even if it may not have been the way that you intended when you arrived).

Can I study abroad and be pre-health?

Yes, it's a wonderful experience that shouldn't be missed if it interests you. An international experience can complement and enhance both your general program of study and your pre-health interests. Moreover, fluency in a language other than English and cross-cultural experience can enhance your application to health professional school. Generally, students work with the Study Abroad advisers to plan their abroad experience and with HPA advisers to plan their pre-health prerequisite courses around it.

What kinds of grades will I need to be accepted to med school?

Schools will consider your academic metrics: grades, MCAT, letters of rec that support your performance, choice of classes, and combination of classes. Additionally, schools are aware of the quality of our students and academic programs, which will work in your favor as an applicant. Currently, our accepted students average around a 3.5 GPA (nationally it's around a 3.7) with an MCAT above the 85th percentile. But, grades aren't everything: there are many factors that come into play in the admissions process.

ACTIVITIES**What kinds of co-curricular experiences should I seek?**

You should pursue anything that interests you and helps you develop as a future health professional. Medical schools are interested in students who are intellectually curious, are passionate, contribute actively, show their dedication to serving others, and are leaders in the community — these are all qualities that are vital for future physicians. You should choose a few things to do meaningfully and well, and always focus on your academics first.

Do I need to have medically-related experiences?

It is important that you involve yourself meaningfully in a medical setting, to show medical schools (and yourself!) that you have observed medical practice first-hand and have a realistic understanding of the career to which you're committing. Students often do this through volunteer work in hospitals and clinics, summer jobs, internships, formal pre-health summer programs, and shadowing physicians.

Was volunteering in high school enough?

It's a good start, and you're encouraged to draw on these experiences and the people that you met through them to gain even more clinical experience as a college student.

Princeton doesn't have a medical school. How do students gain clinical experience?

As an institution committed to the liberal arts and focused on the undergraduate experience, we do not have a medical, law or business school on our campus. But, this in no way precludes relevant, timely clinical exposure. Some students volunteer at the local hospital (accessible via the Tiger Transit bus), as EMTs on the local rescue squad (PFARS), and with student groups through the Pace Center Student Volunteer Corps (SVC), some shadow local physicians, some even create Breakout trips to explore health care settings during school vacations. Sometimes students find it easier, though, to devote time to the medical environment during vacations and focus on classes, studying and other activities during the academic year.

What else can I do to serve the community?

Community service is a means to demonstrate your concern and compassion for others, and gives you an opportunity to work with those different from yourself, which is important in getting ready to see patients of all backgrounds. The PACE Center for Civic Engagement (pace.princeton.edu) can help to connect you.

Do I need to do research to get into medical school?

As with any other experience, try it if you think you would enjoy it, but don't do it just because you think it'll give you an "edge." Health professional schools want you to engage in activities that interest you, while helping you develop the skills and values that will improve your practice as a health care provider. That said, working in a faculty member's lab or in summer research internship can provide you with insight into the world of research, hands-on skills, and ideally a strong recommendation letter.

THE MCAT

What is the MCAT?

The MCAT is a full-day, multiple-choice standardized test required by medical schools. It tests critical analysis and reading skills, biological and physical sciences content knowledge, and concepts from psychology and sociology that address the importance of socio-cultural and behavioral determinants of health and health outcomes. You will be best equipped to take the MCAT when you have completed general and organic chemistry, biology, biochemistry and physics, and have gained familiarity with statistics, psychology and sociology. Similar tests are administered for most health professions. Learn more on the AAMC website: <http://www.aamc.org/mcat/>.

What score do I need on the MCAT to get into medical school?

There is no magical formula. A score of 509 or above (around the 80th percentile) is generally considered competitive, but it's only one factor of many for gaining admission.

Does Princeton University offer MCAT prep classes?

Test prep companies offer classes on or near campus, but Princeton is not affiliated with them and does not endorse any specific company. Students should research what these courses offer based on personal study habits and learning styles. Many students do fine by saving their money and creating a self-study program. It's a matter of personal preference – but make sure that you do study!

How well do Princeton University students do on the MCAT?

In recent MCAT administrations (Jan 2015-Sept 2016), the national mean for examinees was a 500.2. Princeton's mean score was a 514 (around the 92nd percentile) and 82% scored in the competitive range.

APPLYING TO MED SCHOOL

How does Princeton University support applicants?

Meeting with advisers throughout your time at Princeton will help you prepare thoughtfully before you apply. As application time draws near, there will be more guided advising, a series of workshops, and an interview process, and advisers will prepare a committee letter of recommendation on your behalf. Medical schools place great value on the committee letter as a summary of your candidacy holistically.

When should I apply to medical school and how do I go about it?

Ideally, you should not apply until you are certain that you're ready to make a lifetime commitment, and are a strong enough candidate to merit serious consideration by your chosen schools. Pragmatically, you should have:

- Completed (and done well in) pre-requisite courses.
- Carved out ample time to prepare for the MCAT.
- Gotten to know enough faculty and others to garner 4-6 strong letters of recommendation.
- Gained meaningful experience with patients and exposure to your chosen profession.

It takes about 15 months to go through the application cycle, so if you want to go directly to med school, you'll apply in the June following your junior year.

Is it okay to take time off between graduating from Princeton and medical school?

Yes! Over 70% of Princeton applicants opt to take at least one "glide" or "gap" year before health professional school. This allows students to avoid taking MCAT during the school year, to have better letters of recommendation, to have more flexibility to study abroad and engage in co-curricular activities, to gain work experience, and to give themselves a break between two rigorous academic endeavors. The average age of a medical school matriculant is 24 – plenty of others are opting for some time off to regroup and pursue other interests. All of the services that Princeton HPA offers are available to you as an alumnus.

STATISTICS

How many pre-health students are there? How many eventually go on to medical school?

Between 300 and 400 incoming students designate an interest in the health professions in their Princeton entrance materials, and about 150 of them will apply to medical, dental, or veterinary school at some point (records for other professions are harder to track). HPA advisers believe that any student who is admitted to Princeton has the talent to gain admittance to health professional school, but many find that their interests, values, and skills are better aligned to other avenues as they explore diverse academic and career paths.

What percentage of Princeton University applicants get into medical schools?

Nationally, Princeton's acceptance rate for students to allopathic medical (MD) schools in recent years has been about double the national average (85-90% vs. 41-44%), and we are similarly successful with applicants to osteopathic medical (DO), dental, and veterinary schools. More importantly, our students feel well-prepared for their professional school, and do well once they're accepted.

Which medical schools do Princeton University students apply to and attend most often?

Many choose to attend public medical schools in their home state, where financing options are favorable and support networks close at hand. Many also choose urban areas with diverse patient populations. The med schools where we have the most students right now are Columbia, U Penn, Rutgers-Robert Wood Johnson, Weill Cornell, Harvard, NYU, UCSF, Stanford, Case Western, and Yale.

ADVISING

When should I meet with HPA advisers?

Come and find us early and often! We'll be available at course registration during orientation to answer initial questions, then attend a Pre-Health 101 Info Session in the fall and bring follow-up questions to an individual appointment or to drop in hours. We look forward to meeting all of you, and the earlier we get to know you, the more we'll be able to help you set and reach your goals.

Where is HPA?

Our office is located 36 University Place. We are at the back of the 2nd floor – take the elevator in the University Store to floor 2M, or walk in past Career Services to our front entrance.